

January 1990

The Practicum and the Changing Face of Archival Education: Observations and Recommendations

Frederick J. Stielow

Catholic University of America

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stielow, Frederick J., "The Practicum and the Changing Face of Archival Education: Observations and Recommendations," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 8 no. 1 (1990) .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol8/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

The Practicum and the Changing Face of Archival Education: Observations and Recommendations

Frederick J. Stielow

Until the 1970s, work experience was the singular training venue for most American archivists. A proto-archivist came to the field with background education in the humanities and learned on-the-job. However effective a method for instilling institutional practices, OJT (on-the-job training) has its limits as a vehicle for professionalization. Practitioners were rarely steeped or even informed about the theories and complexities of information systems or the auxiliary sciences of history. Most archivists were constricted by the pragmatic realities of their daily work schedule; hence, they were without the time or "leisure" to theorize about their problems in an abstracted fashion. During recent years, archivists have begun to break out of this circular trap due in part to the rise of graduate archival education programs. Archival education now stands as the major transportation on the

road from an apprenticeship-based craft to a profession, but this road is still very new and full of bumps.¹

Education programs should teach general principles and theoretical structures, as well as instruct on cutting edge developments and induct initiates into the jargon and history of the field—necessary elements that are not easily garnered while processing collections fulltime. The amount of applicable knowledge—"what we did not know we should have known"—is truly awesome. Not only have archivists just begun to penetrate the mysteries of automation and to test information science paradigms, but they are still woefully unaware of their own history.

Although with roots to Ernst Posner and programs in the 1940s, the effective birth of a continuing tradition of archival education dates more properly to the early 1970s. Since then, education has made rapid strides and is currently in a period of rapid transition. For the first time, the potential exists for a true research agenda and pushing the knowledge base of the field along true experimental lines. Yet despite advances, the archival educator must acknowledge a basic dilemma. One does not become an

¹ Primary background research for this article was conducted through personal files of the SAA's Continuing Education and Profession Development Committee and through informal discussions with archival educators. Frank B. Evans and Robert Warner, "American Archivists and Their Society," *American Archivist* 34 (1971): 169, reported that sixty-four percent of the archivists responding to their 1970 survey had graduate degrees—two thirds in history—but less than fifty percent had even a single course in archives administration.

archivist by ingesting classroom knowledge alone. Just as doctors become doctors by practicing medicine, historians by conducting research and writing, lawyers by standing before the bar--archivists become archivists by actually working in archives.

Field experience is axiomatic in all current education programs of any worth. Assuming one is not entering a program with prior or ongoing work experience, the major method for including a practical component is the appropriately named "practicum" or internship. Although this addition is obvious and ubiquitous, it is still quite troublesome and strangely has rarely been even mentioned in archival literature. William LeFurgy noted some of the problems in 1981 in a three-page note, which still stands almost alone. According to LeFurgy, the practicum suffered from two major factors: 1) the lack of realistic standards and requirements to guide the on-site managers and 2) the absence of adequate administrative oversight by the educators. In 1990, it is fair to say that difficulties with the practicum still exist.²

To understand the nature of the practicum, one needs to be aware of the changing face of archival education in the 1980s (that is, a historical framework). Current tools date only to the 1977 Society of American Archivists's (SAA) "Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education

² William LeFurgy, "The Practicum: A Repository View," *American Archivist* 44 (1981): 153-55. In addition to this article, a more in-depth study of the practica is in the offing from Richard Cox as his proposed dissertation topic at the University of Pittsburgh.

Programs," which helped establish a three course sequence, including a practicum.³ The importance of the last was further established by the subsequent issuing of SAA's "Program Standard for Archival Education: The Practicum." This statement was partially based on the then dominant trend of linking archival education to the shops of the archivists teaching in the programs: among them, Ruth Helmuth at Case Western Reserve, Philip Mason at Western Michigan, and Gerry Ham at Wisconsin. Those archivists were pioneers with great abilities to structure meaningful experiences for their students.⁴

The practicum guidelines codified the educators' own practices and a 140 hour work load, but were also intended to provide supplementary aid for students assigned to other, normally less educationally-structured archives than their own. The guidelines supposedly championed flexibility, yet were in fact quite rigid. They proclaimed it "essential that the practicum provide the student with experience in all major facets of an archival program" and specifically prescribed acquisition, processing, preservation, and reference as *the* four areas of coverage. Those with more specialized interest were simply directed to take additional practica.⁵

³ "Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs," *American Archivist* 41 (1978): 105-06.

⁴ "Program Standard for Archival Education: The Practicum," *American Archivist* 43 (1980): 420-22.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Yet archival education itself was soon embarked on a more expanded journey. The number of practitioner-based three-course offerings grew, but some courses were offered by regular full time faculty without their own archives. More importantly, "sans-archives" educators were hired on tenure lines by history and library science departments to build independent archival programs: McCrank/Stielow/Burke at Maryland, Terry Eastwood at British Columbia, Michael Lutzker at New York University, Bert Rhoads at Western Washington, David Gracy at Texas, Bob Williams at South Carolina, and onto Stielow at Catholic University, Richard Cox at the University of Pittsburgh, and, most recently, Greg Hunter at Long Island University.⁶

The old guidelines were no longer totally suitable in this changed environment. For example, the practica that were once the cornerstone of a three-course sequence soon became the fourth option or one out of a panoply of a dozen or more courses—some of which include a practical experience component of some forty hours as a course requirement or option. Moreover, students began to specialize—not just in college and university, but business, science, and religious archives or in preservation or

⁶ Timothy Ericson, "Professional Associations and Archival Education," *American Archivist* 51 (1988): 298-311, provides a breakdown of the changing face of archival education as reflected in the SAA's 1986 *Education Directory*.

automation. Students thus increasingly desired work experience in equally specialized archives.

The spread to outside archives also meant less control. As LeFurgy suggested, the needs of the host institution might mean that students could not expect the general introduction to processing assumed in the guidelines. Educators have had to realize that students might also benefit by working in an institution because of its prestige or specializations and not for any ability to provide a general overview of practice. In addition, all parties should be aware that training in areas like automation, cataloging, and preservation management might also mean that the interns were actually more expert in some topics than their practitioner mentors. Some cognizance was also demanded of returning students with prior experience, those working in archives while in school, or those who have a post-graduation job which includes basic in-house training.⁷

Thus by the mid-1980s, the old education guidelines could no longer encompass the reality of the practicum or the drive for what amounted to a Master's degree in archival studies. SAA's Continuing Education and Professional Development Committee (CEPD) responded with an updated 1988 SAA "Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs." The new edition included a demand for a regular faculty member at the head of a full archival education program, and, more importantly for this discussion, it added a needed acknowledgement and definition of archivists who guided student interns as

⁷ LeFurgy, "The Practicum," 154.

educators/mentors: "Advisors and Supervisors—The persons who advise and supervise practical field experiences should be archivists with professional experience in the area of the practicum."⁸

The practicum itself was recognized as essential: "Students should be required to participate in practica of 140 hours or more that provide experience, particularly in the full range of the basic archival functions." However, the 1988 guide also equivocated when it stated that "the decision about the nature of such practica should be dependent upon the student's career goals and interests and the availability of suitable archival repositories." Thus, a call was also issued for new practicum guidelines, as a party to the education publication.⁹

Unfortunately, two CEPD subcommittees later the profession is still without new practicum guidelines. Beyond bureaucratic inefficiencies, the reasons for this delay reflect the complexity just described. Other factors include the variety of departmental structures to control the practica. History departments, for example, generally have less familiarity with a field experience component than library schools, but generally seem content to leave the management in the hands of the archival educator. On

⁸ "Society of American Archivists Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs," *American Archivist* 51 (1980): 380-89, which were written by a CEPD subcommittee of Richard Cox, Susan Davis, and Frederick Stielow and approved by SAA Council in February 1988.

⁹ *Ibid.*

the other hand, library schools already had practica as part of their curricula before the addition of archives. Thus, the archival practicum became one option within an existing framework.¹⁰

In a recent survey, J. Gordon Coleman noted that, although fifty-five of the sixty library schools had practica in their catalogs, only six reported the offering as a required course for the MLS with less than forty percent of the MLS graduates actually taking it. Practica coordination was equally divided between schools where one faculty member coordinated activities at all sites and those where the coordination was based on faculty specialization. Student hour requirements vary from 84 to 225, and performance criteria also included a report at 46 schools, a diary or journal at 36, and a distinct project at 19.¹¹

The variety can be seen in a brief comparison of three programs. Catholic University maintains a list of potential

¹⁰ The call for new practicum guidelines arose coevally in CEPD with SAA Council's request for new education guidelines in 1986. Terry Eastwood was charged with developing the first plan, and he was followed by a data collection effort in the charge of Julia Marks Young. In late 1989, a third campaign was launched with Constance Schulz at the helm.

¹¹ J. Gordon Coleman, Jr., "The Role of the Practicum in Library Schools," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 30 (1989): 19-27; for a historical view look back to the classic, see C. C. Williamson, *Training for Library Service* (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1980), 53-68.

sites and runs the practicum as a course under the direction of a nonarchival educator. The intent is to marry specific (often prestigious) institutions to the students' particular needs as an introduction to work in archives, but not necessarily a general overview of all practice elements. The experience can be repeated up to three times at different sites. Students can take the class at any time after the completion of three required general MLS courses and either Archival Management or Information Resources and Records Management, but are not allowed to work for money. The University of British Columbia mandates the practicum at the end of the student's first year of study and generally supports work for pay. The program helps place the students and develop the work schedule with the employers, who are made aware of the training of their interns. The University of Maryland has two major options. One is under the History Department and can be for money; it incorporates the practicum as the second of the basic two-course introduction to archives sequence during the summer session. The other is the not-for-pay library school internship course run by a faculty member and the head of the school's library that is quite similar to Catholic's offering.¹²

In addition to the variety of structures, archivists must also recognize the emergence of an educational elite without need of recourse to the SAA. SAA's guidance,

¹² Taken from the guideline handouts at the respective schools. Terry Eastwood, "The Origins and Aims of the Master of Archival Studies," *Archivaria* 16 (1983): 35-52.

while useful at the start and valuable as a debating tool, holds little sway in the face of departmental policies. The potential for tension among educators and practitioners and their professional associations is almost a given at this stage of development of the archival field. Paul Conway, for example, while still working for SAA wrote of the need to have independent full-time faculty members, because of the "drag" or inertia that results from tying education "too closely to the very practitioners it serves."¹³ Indeed, archival education programs with well established practica do not require SAA pronouncements; moreover, they evince little interest (nor have the ability to pay the thousands of dollars) for the clout that the professional body could receive from accreditation. In the future, archival education may even evolve away from a practical experience component—perhaps, toward post-graduation internships, but that time is far off.

Fortunately, all sides still need each other, and even the most advanced educational programs rest in part on the practica. The best offerings still can benefit from an exchange of ideas on this topic, as could other less developed programs and those just starting. The question must not be "turf," but cooperation and the nature of practica guidelines to help coordinate the current reality.

The first point, however, is to do away with any prescriptive notions. Instead, guidelines should be truly flexible aids to better the present situation and not to

¹³ Paul Conway, "Archival Education and the Need for Full-Time Faculty," *American Archivist* 51 (1988): 255.

dictate from a narrow, unenforceable base. One useful flourish, for example, could be clearly delineated models that replicate an ideal situation as a point of reference, but also suggest the acceptability of more specialized experiences. Flexibility must also extend to the potential recognition of credit for the returning practitioner or students working in the field while they study, as well as to allow more than one practical experience. In addition, the document might acknowledge the utility of shorter (forty hours or so) practical exercises as alternatives or supplements to a full 140 hour practicum. Sample evaluation forms for the student and the site, plus a model contract between those two parties should also be included.

Above all, any practicum guidelines need to represent the shared interests of the profession and the three key players in the experience: the student, the educator, and the onsite trainer/supervisor. Students must be recognized for the advanced theoretical knowledge that they can bring to the site. Although relative neophytes on the bench, these are graduate students who have had the leisure to study abstract concepts, which could aid the repository. They should not be exploited as cheap labor (save that for undergraduates, who also should be dealt with in the guidelines), but managed to ensure the development of pleasant and effective future colleagues. Educators are the intermediary and final quality control. Their role is to help place the student in the most advantageous locations for the student's educational program, as well as to monitor the student's progress and the site's contributions.

And finally, there are the forgotten players in the extant practicum guidelines—the onsite supervisors. The educator should help to inform them of the nature of the practicum as it relates to the student in question and any preparatory coursework. The guidelines could help immeasurably by explicating the supervisors' own unique roles and contributions and helping them through the very difficult tasks of acting as manager, mentor, and trainer at the same time. In addition, such a recast document could aid bureaucratically by providing an explanation of the professional nature of such service to any nonarchival employers.

New guidelines and an understanding of the principles and realities cited above are a practical necessity. Given proper review and the possibility of input from all sides, new practicum guidelines could even help mitigate against the centrifugal forces that come with professionalization and the growth of an educational sector. Here is a path for continuing cooperation to aid the field along the awkward road to maturation.

Frederick J. Stielow is associate professor of library science at the Catholic University of America. A version of this article was presented at the 1989 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in St. Louis.